The Making of Womanhood in Early India: Pativrata in the Mahabharata and Ramayana

Myungnam Kang

Abstract

As the symbol of a patriarchal society, the *Pativratas* have been recognized as the ideal women in the brahmanical tradition. Traditionally Sita, Savitri, Arundhati, Anasuya and Damayanti have long been celebrated as the *Pativratas*. They accept chastity,2 submissiveness and wifely devotion as the highest qualities of their selfhood. They practice and pursue *stridharma* (*pativrata dharma*) during their entire life and even in their previous or afterlife. Sometimes the extreme devotion of *stridharma* enabled them to acquire extraordinary power. Their sexuality is totally controlled by their husbands. They all belong to the higher social *varnas* in the society. Since the husband is equated with god, to be worshipped according to the *pativrata dharma*, the most miserable situation for the *pativrata* is the death of her husband (god).

In this paper, will focus on some of these depictions of the ideal women to bring out how the brahmanical tradition in early India was constructing notions of womanhood in conformity with caste and other social denominators to reinforce notions of social order and harmony, which privileged those in positions of social power.

Introduction

The control of female sexuality has been regarded as one of the most important subjects in the brahmanical patriarchal society. This was because the purity of caste can be sustained by the control of female sexuality.[i] As one of the means of control female sexuality and emphasize women's submissiveness to men, the notion of *pativratadharma* had played an important role in the brahmanical tradition. Only the woman, who successfully accomplished her duty on *pativratadharma,* can acquire a position of the *pativratas*. The *pativrata,* as the symbol of patriarchal society, has been recognized as the ideal woman in the brahmanical tradition. She accepts chastity, submissiveness and wifely devotion as the highest qualities of their selfhood. Sometimes her extreme devotion of *pativratadharma* enables her to obtain extraordinary power. Her sexuality is totally controlled by her husband. Since the husband is equated with god, to be worshipped according to the *pativratadharma*, the most miserable situation for her is the death of her husband.

Traditionally, Sita, Savitri, Arundhati, Anasuya and Damayanti have long been celebrated as the *Pativratas*. All these mythical figures, having a comparatively high social status, first appeared in the epics as wives of Rama, Satyavan, Vasishtha, Atri and Nala respectively. Except Sita, who was the main female protagonist in the *Ramayana*, others' stories were not a part of the main-stream narrative in the epics. If we remove their stories, the epics are not affected in the least.[ii] However, today four-other women are as famous as Sita and their stories have strongly influenced on Hindu women's lives.

In this paper, focusing on three legendary figures – Arundhati, Ahalya and Savitri – in the epics, I would examine how the brahmanical tradition in early India had tried to establish the subordination of women through the ideology of *pativratadharma*.

Arundhati

In the brahmanical tradition, Arundhati appears as a star to which brides at the time of marriage rituals swear their fidelity and chastity.[iii] As a wife of sage Vasishtha, Arundhati appeared in the five books (parvans) of the *Mahabharata*. However these are only allusions to the Arundhati legend. Her full story, such as birth, marriage and death, was not given in the *Mahabharata*. In the Adi Parvan (Book I, chapter 224, verses 26-31) Arundhati was mentioned when Vaishampayana narrated the story of Mandapala. When the sage Mandapala spoke to his wife Jarita who was jealous of her co-wife Lapita, Arundhati appeared as an example for warning of women's jealousy. Because of her jealousy, Arundhati turned into a tiny star like a red ember overlaid by smoke, not very lovely, sometimes visible sometimes not, which appeared like a bad omen. Although we cannot find any specific explanation for Arundhati's jealousy, the context in which this episode narrated suggests that polygamy was a very common phenomenon, and it may be postulated that Arundhati was also jealous of her co-wives.

In the Aranyaka Parvan (Book III, chapter 113, 130 and 214-5) Arundhati was depicted as a chaste woman who devotedly served her husband. The chapter 113 was narrated by Lomasha on the marriage of Rishyashringa and Shanta. Arundhati appeared with Vasishtha as an example of ideal couples along with Lopamudra – Agastya and Damayanti – Nala. The chapter 130 mentioned about the divine place Vatikasanda where Arundhati and Vasishtha attained peace. The chapter 214-5 contained the seduction of Agni by Svaha. Svaha, falling in love with Agni, was trying to assume the shapes of each of the seers' wives, except Arundhati. Although we cannot find detail information on this, we can assume that Arundhati's chastity hinders Svaha from carrying out her plan perfectly. Or, it may be the case that Arundhati's reputation was already known and hence Svaha did not take her form.

In the Udyoga Parvan (Book V, chapter 111) Arundhati appeared when Narada narrated the marriage of Divodasa and Madhavi. The interesting point here is that the sexual dimension of the relationship between Vasishtha and Arundhati was explicitly brought in. Also here Arundhati appeared with the epithet Akshamala.[iv] In the Shanti Parvan (Book XII, chapter 318) Arundhati was mentioned as a star when Yajnavalkya narrated the premonitory indication of death after a year.[v] She becomes a marker for all human beings because if she is not sighted she has the power to bring death. In the Anushasana Parvan (Book XIII, chapter 130) Arundhati was described as a great ascetic woman who explained the mysteries of dharma to sages, ancestors and gods. This chapter, narrated by Bhishma, shows that Arundhati had a great ascetic merit and was equal to her husband Vasishtha in power for in both vows and conducts.

Arundhati had an ambiguous character in the *Mahabharata*. While she appeared as a jealous woman in one place, she was also described as a devoted wife of sage Vasishtha and a great ascetic woman. Her character as a devoted wife was more firmly established in the later literature. Especially in the later *Puranas* Arundhati became the best *pativrata* in all three worlds. The *Kalika Purana* (chapter 19, 20, 22, 23) gave us a coherent narrative of Arundhati in terms of her birth, life in the parental home and her marriage to the sage Vasishtha. The description of her rebirth from Sandhya to Arundhati and her marriage in three different births (as Urjja, Arundhati and Akshamala) with Vasishtha reinforced the chastity and fidelity of Arundhati. Also her character as a faithful wife was developed in the *Uttararamacarita* of Bhavabhuti (8th century CE). Here Arundhati, following her husband's advice, finally succeeded in announcing and convincing Sita's purity to everyone.

Ahalya

Like Arundhati, Ahalya is also introduced in the marriage of Hindus as the symbol related to wifely fidelity. However, unlike Arundhati, Ahalya has been recognized as an anti – *pativrata* in the brahmanical tradition. This is because she is representative of the figure of an adulterer. Her adultery with Indra has provided some imaginative insights to a wide range of later and contemporary scholars from different disciplinary vantage points. The various issues relating to her adultery such as the problem of spontaneity or use of violence became the important themes in the later literature.

In Sri Lanka and India, Ahalya appears as a black stone that the bride touches with her foot while she promises never to be like Ahalya but to be a chaste and devoted wife.[vi] Ahalya, a wife of sage Gautama, appeared in the two epics; it is alluded to four times in the *Mahabharata* and its full story is narrated twice in the *Ramayana*.

Among these allusions in the *Mahabharata*, the story of Ahalya in the Udyoga Parvan (Book V, chapter 12, verse 6) caught our attention. The chapter 12, narrated by Shalya, shows the conversation between Nahusha and the gods. When Indra, accused of brahminicide (the killing of Vritra), hid himself in the water, Nahusha took Indra's office and laid claim to Shaci, the wife of Indra. While the other gods condemned Nahusha, he insisted on his claim. Ahalya was mentioned in this context. Nahusha referred to Indra's intercourse with Ahalya to defend himself. Here, Ahalya was a renowned wife of sage Gautama and violated by Indra. What is significant in this telling is that Ahalya was presumed to be innocent and Indra's violation of her was well-known and accepted fact. Although we could not find Ahalya's own voice in the *Mahabharata*, the expression for her such as 'a renowned lady' and the reference to her 'being violated' enable us to assume her comparative high status and innocence in the episode of her sexual encounter with Indra.

Ahalya appeared twice in the *Ramayana*. In the first book of the *Ramayana* (I. 47. 10 – 32, 48), the story of Ahalya was narrated in the context of Rama's journey with the sage Vishvamitra and Lakshmana from Vishvamitra's hermitage to the court of king Janaka. According to Sutherland, this story was a part of a 'coming – of – age – tour'. She argues that the first book provided Rama's instructive adventure from adolescence to manhood and was the means for a patriarchal society to articulate the negotiation of sexual anxiety. She understands the story of Gautama and Ahalya as a tale of sexual crime and its punishment.[vii] Here Ahalya not only committed a sexual transgression spontaneously aroused by 'her lust for the king of the gods' but entreated her lover (Indra) to protect her. The punishment for this adultery was 'being invisible for thousand years' and she can be released by her traditional hospitality toward Rama.

The last book of the *Ramayana* (VII. 30. 18 – 44) also contains the story of Ahalya. The chapter 30 was addressed by Agastya to Rama. Agastya narrated Indrajit's victory over Indra resulted from the curse of the sage Gautama. Ahalya was mentioned when Brahma indicated Indra's past sin. In this version of the story, we go back to the idea that Ahalya was innocent; she accepted Indra because he was disguised as her husband. Here, for the first time, we get to know of the birth of Ahalya and also about the importance of Rama regarding her emancipation from Gautama's curse. Her infidelity and unchastity were stressed particularly given the description of her birth in this context. As a daughter of Brahma, Ahalya possessed a unique beauty among the women in the three worlds, and was desired by all the celestial beings, including Indra. In this situation, she should have ideally escaped or overcome the trial of seduction as was appropriate for *pativrata* but eventually she failed.

In most cases in the epics Ahalya appeared as an innocent victim. If we focus on the characteristic of Ahalya in the *Mahabharata*, we can notice her chastity and fidelity. However, in the later literature she was only described as anti – *pativrata* woman. The renowned Ahalya of the *Mahabharata* turned into the stone-woman in the later *Puranas*. Becoming a stone was one of the curses given by Gautama and gained popularity from the later *Puranas* (*Skanda* and *Brahmavaivarta Purana*) onwards.

Savitri

Savitri has been represented as one of the role models of Hindu women. Her effort to save her husband Satyavan's life against Yama (the god of death) makes her the best *pativrata* in the brahmanical tradition. She appears in the religious practice called 'Vata – Savitri – Vrata' as the goddess who is worshipped by married women for their husband's health and longevity. On the full moon day of Jyeshtha (May – June), women whose husbands are living perform the Savitri – Vrata or Vata – Savitri – Vrata even now in many parts of India. Different from the story of Arundhati and Ahalya, the Savitri story was given fully in the *Mahabharata*.

In the Aranyaka Parvan (Book III. 277 – 283) the story of Savitri was told when the exiled Pandava king Yudhishthira asked the sage Markandeya whether there had been a woman whose devotion matched with Draupadi's. In reply, Markandeya narrated Savitri's story. Here, the Savitri myth was narrated to juxtapose her as a devoted, virtuous wife, capable of matching with Draupadi. Thus when Yudhishthira heard the story of Savitri he was supposed to expect the same result from his wife Draupadi.

The first chapter (277) describes the context of the story and gives information about Savitri from her birth till her marriage. To acquire sons, the Madra king Ashvapati performed severe penance. After 18 years, the goddess Savitri appeared and promised to give a splendid daughter to him. When Savitri was grown up, Ashvapati worried about his daughter and told her to find a husband on her own. She departed to the forest with the king's experienced counselors. The second chapter (278) shows the celestial sage Narada's prediction to Ashvapati about the death of Satyavan, and strong will of Savitri who insists on marrying Satyavan. When the sage Narada warned that Satyavan would die after a year, she stood by her decision to marry him. Savitri finally persuaded her father and Narada they were getting married. The third chapter (279) narrates Savitri's marriage with Satyavan and her new life in the forest. Savitri began an ascetic way of life following her husband and in-law parents. The fourth chapter (280) contains Savitri's three-night fasting vow. Reminding Narada's prediction Savitri observed of three-night vow. The fifth chapter (281) is the longest and describes her encounter with Yama, the long speech of Savitri and the four boons she obtained from Yama. On reaching the forest, Satyavan was suddenly afflicted with a headache and wanted to sleep. Savitri rested his head in her lap and thought about Narada's remark. At that moment, she saw Yama coming to them. They started the discussion on dharma. Due to her great knowledge about dharma she persuaded Yama and Yama promised four boons (restoration of eyesight and kingdom for her father-in-law, sons for her father, sons for herself by Satyavan, and finally Satyavan's life) to her. The sixth chapter (282) narrates Dyumatsena (Savitri's father-in-law)'s sudden regaining of eyesight and Savitri's explanation about her encounter with Yama in the forest. The last chapter (283) is concerned with how the remaining boons were fulfilled.

In the *Mahabharata* Savitri appeared as an active, independent and self-assertive woman. Also she was described as a great ascetic woman who possessed mysterious knowledge about dharma. In the conversation between Yama and Savitri, the main speaker was Savitri. Her attitude was dignified and voice was commanding.[viii]   Savitri myth shows she perfectly

accomplished her duty of *pativratadharma* and at the result of this she can save herself[ix], her parents, her parents-in-laws and her husband's entire family from calamity.

Conclusion

The ideology of *pativratadharma* had been applied to the concept penetrating the epics. To become *pativrata*, a woman should realize their selfhood not as a sexual being who follows the *strisvabhava* (innate nature) but as a social being who accepts and follows the *stridharma* or *pativratadharma*.

Arundhati and Savitri became the well-known *pativratas* because they accomplish the *pativratadharama* successfully and Ahalya failed to gain the title of *pativrata* because she could not keep her chastity whether she wanted or not.

This ideology of *pativrata* has steadily emphasized in the later literature. With the intention to strengthen the *pativratadharma*, the writers (usually male) have dealt with this subject very seriously. Thus Arundhati and Savitri's fidelity and chastity were more emphasized and Ahalya's failure was more highlighted in the later literature.

Notes

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[i] According to Chakravarti, the mechanism of control operated through three devices and at three different levels in early India. The first was through ideology (*stridharma* or *pativratadharma*) internalized by women. This ideology was a rhetorical device to ensure the social control of women. The second was the authority of husband or male kinsmen. They used coercion and physical chastisement for women who violated the norms of society. The third was the patriarchal state of early India itself. In this situation, the king was only the ultimate agency by which women's sexuality was controlled. Uma Chakravarti, *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories: Beyond the Kings and Brahmanas of 'Ancient' India*, Tulika Books: New Delhi, 2006, pp. 147-151.

[ii] Bhattacharji asserts that some immortal narratives of high literary merit such the story of Nala – Damayanati, Savitri – Satyavan and Shakuntala – Dusyanta were inserted when the *Bharata* had been changed to the *Mahabharata* through the brahmanical accretions or Bhargava interpolations during the period between the 1st century CE and 4th century CE. The primary concern of these narratives was the glorification of the brahmanas. Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women and Society in Ancient India,* Basumati Corp.: Calcutta, 1994.

[iii] This is *Dhruvarundhati darshana*. At this time, the bride breaks her silence and says "may my husband live and may I secure offspring". The bride is to observe silence till she sees the Pole star, Arundhati and the seven sages (the constellation of Ursa Major). P. V. Kane, *History of Dharma⊥#ra*, Vol. 2, Part I, pp. 527-538.

[iv] Akshamala means a string or rosary of beads, especially of Eleocarpurs seeds; name of Arundhati, wife of Vasishtha (from her wearing a rosary); name of the mother of Vatsa. Sir Monier Monier – Williams, *Sanskrit – English Dictionary*, Manohar: New Delhi, 2006, p. 3.

[v] "One, who having previously seen the fixed star called Arundhati, fails to see it, or that other star called Dhruva, or one that sees the full moon or the flame of a burning lamp to be broken towards the south, has but one year to live. Those men, O king, who can no longer see images of themselves reflected in the eyes of others, have but one year to live"

[vi] Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, OUP: New Delhi, 2002, pp. 94-95, 16n. During my seminar presentation (1st May, 2010), Dr. Bharati Jagannathan

(Dept. of History, Miranda House, Delhi University) and Ms. Meenakshi Jha (Student, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University) also confirmed such a practice in Tamil and Mithila marriage traditions.

[vii] Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, "Gendered Narratives: Gender, Space and Narrative Structure in V#lm3ki's B#lak#<*a" in Bose, Mandakranta (ed.), *R#m#ya<a Revisited*, Oxford: New York, 2004, pp. 47-85.

[viii] Her character totally changed and she lost her independent character in the later *Purana*. In the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* (2. 23-24), she was described as a young lady who wanted to learn various knowledge from Yama. Here main speaker was Yama and Savitri appeared as a listener who was very curious. Chakrabarti argues that the long speech (over 800 verses) of Yama contains the quintessence of Brahmanism and makes listeners familiar with the principle of the Puranas. Kunal Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Pur#<as and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, OUP: New Delhi, 2001, PP. 262-263.

[ix] Chakravati asserts that Savitri fights off the god of death to avoid being a widow. Uma Chakravarti, *Ibid*., p. 162.

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